

VF - Gravelotte - St. Privat

GRAVELLOTTE - ST. PRIVAT / 1870

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870/71 was a logical continuation of the policy adopted by Prussia in 1866 of "unifying the Reich from the top downward" and without Austria. Following the defeat of the Hapsburgs in Vienna, it was now the time for military force to be used in eliminating the opposition of Napoleon III, who regarded himself as the guarantor of the "Main line" (i.e., the River Main), to such a drastic change in the balance of power in Europe. Bismarck succeeded in provoking the Emperor of the French into declaring war on 19 July 1870, whereupon the South German states took the side of Prussia as the "injured party", enabling the latter to enter the war with a significantly greater number of troops.

After defeats in Alsace and at the Saar between the 4th and 6th of August, the French Army of the Rhine was badly hit and forced to retreat. The main force, consisting of the IInd, IIIrd and IVth Corps and the Guards was gathered around the fortress of Metz where it was also joined by the VIth Corps. On the 12th of August, Marshal Bazaine took over command in place of the emperor who was suffering from a bladder complaint. The three corps of the army group stationed in the South under Marshal Mac Mahon withdrew right back to the camp at Châlons-sur-Marne to collect reinforcements and then to rejoin the main force.

Of the three German armies, the 3rd Army of the Crown Prince of Prussia, consisting of five army corps of Prussian and South German troops, followed Mac Mahon. The 1st Army, commanded by General Steinmetz with the Ist, VIIth and VIIIth Army Corps, and the 2nd Army of Prince Frederick Charles with the IInd, IIIrd, IVth, IXth, Xth and XIIth Army Corps and the Prussian Guards advanced without delay to the crossings over the Moselle below and above Metz.

Although the war of 1859 had already revealed many shortcomings in the organization of the French military system such as the sluggish mobilization of the field-troops or the lack of reserve facilities, it was only the Prussian victory of 1866 over Austria and the failure of the reckless

French intervention in Mexico (1861-1867) that led to the reforms initiated by Marshal Niel whose name is better known in connection with a noble species of rose rather than for his contribution to military history since he died already in 1869. The Chassepot breech-loading rifle was issued to the infantry in 1867 and the re-equipment of the artillery with rifled-bore muzzle-loaders was completed. Furthermore, in the course of a liberal political "relaxation", the National Guard was re-established and improvements were made in the system of raising reserves.

Nevertheless, many weaknesses still remained. These included the contradiction between the organization of the army in peace and in war since divisions and corps were only raised after mobilization; the lack of agreement between the places where the troops of the line were stationed and the districts from which recruits were obtained; the outdated system of substitution with its unfavourable effects on the availability of trained reserves; finally and above all, the corruption caused by Bonapartist inefficiency in the military administration. As in Austria, the advances in military theory resulting from recent wars were disregarded. The system of command was outmoded and the French General Staff had likewise not been developed into a modern instrument of military planning and leadership. Since the Chassepot rifle with its calibre of 11 mm and its range of 1,200 metres was superior to the needle-gun with its 15.43-mm-calibre and a range of only 600 metres, the French generals considered that this outstanding infantry weapon was best used for defence. They recommended urgently that the enemy should first be allowed to attack and only after he had been repulsed should the French troops go over to the offensive. As a result, the initiative was practically presented to the enemy on a plate.

The military authorities of the North German Confederation had taken heed of the tactical and strategic experiences from the war of 1866. Improvements were made in military training and the company column and line, together with the half-battalion in column formation, became the

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main combat unit. At Königgrätz, individual company-columns had already formed scattered groups of riflemen and it was this new mode of combat alone which was suited to an action in which the enemy was also equipped with breech-loading rifles. In this respect, however, the conservative thinking of the Junker generals prevented the full exploitation of the revolutionary significance of the breech-loading rifle for tactics with all its consequences.

The re-equipment of the artillery with rifled-bore cast-steel guns with breech-loading was completed and attention paid to the co-ordination of the two arms. Opinions remained divided as to the cavalry. The campaign in Bohemia brought new experience in this connection but the traditional aristocratic ideas of the role of the cavalry as a decisive element in battles remained. The demand of the General Staff that the cavalry should be employed primarily for reconnaissance and pursuit was accepted in prin-

Attack by Prussian cavalry against French infantry and machine-gun fire at Mars-la-Tour. Lithograph by J. Wendler from a picture by Friedrich Kaiser.

ciple, to be sure, but not enough attention was paid to it in training.

The General Staff also improved the planning of approach-marches and also the technique of marching on a broad front.

Its aim was to encircle the enemy by making a speedy offensive advance on the wings with the centre remaining firm, the enemy thus being encircled and destroyed in a concentric operation. However, most of the army and corps commanders did not understand this objective and—as in 1866—endeavoured to keep very close to each other.

After the frontier battles at Weissenburg, Wörth and Spichern, which had not been envisaged by the German

38 headquarters, the German command did not know for certain the location of the French Army of the Rhine. Admittedly, the scanty information supplied by reconnaissance parties indicated that Mac Mahon was falling back to Châlons but nothing was known about the probable further movements of the main French forces. On the 14th of August, violent fighting broke out at Colombey-Neuilly to the east of Metz but the Prussian headquarters were unable to deduce very much from this.

On account of the unsatisfactory state of its defences, Bazaine had planned to evacuate Metz and likewise withdraw to Châlons via Verdun. He was just about to leave when news reached him that enemy cavalry units had crossed the Moselle. The battle at Colombey-Neuilly had only a slight effect on his intentions. Instead of energetically continuing the preparations for the withdrawal or alternatively making every effort to defend Metz, he displayed a strange indecision and more or less left it to the corps commanders to march to Verdun or otherwise, as they thought best.

In the meantime, not only cavalry divisions but also two, and later three, enemy army corps had crossed the river below Metz. The rapid progress of the German advance-troops resulted on the 16th of August in a surprise attack on the long columns of the French forces on the march. A battle developed along the line Rezonville—Vionville—Mars-la-Tour, powerful cavalry attacks being launched by both the Germans and the French. The fact that both sides each suffered losses of 16,000 to 17,000 men is an indication of the bitter fighting that took place here. Although the enemy attacks were repulsed and the road to Verdun remained open, Bazaine ordered the troops to march back to Metz on the following day.

On the 17th of August, neither the supreme command of the Army of the Rhine nor the Prussian headquarters had an accurate idea of what the enemy would do next. Bazaine made up his mind to lead his army with the IInd, IIIRD, IVth and VIth Corps—leaving the Guards behind as a reserve—to a position northeast of Gravelotte, marching along the ridge from Amanvilliers to the west of Metz and preparing for a battle here with a reversed front. On terrain offering many advantages for his purpose, he intended to clear the road to Verdun and to inflict such a defeat on the German armies that they would have to break off their offensive. Trenches were dug along the ridge in the course

of the evening and night, battery positions were established to give protection to the machine-guns which had only been issued to the troops at the beginning of the war and had not yet achieved a satisfactory standard of technical perfection and the villages cleared by the engineers in readiness for local actions. While all this was in progress, the line of defence which joined up with the left flank at the Moselle was extended to St. Privat and Roncourt south of the Orne by advancing the positions of the French corps. In all, the front covered a length of 11 to 12 kilometres.

The Prussian headquarters decided to exploit the positions gained on the 16th August and to deploy its main forces of the 1st and the 2nd Armies with seven army corps and one army corps as a reserve along the road from Metz to Verdun. Since the French positions ran roughly from south to north, the troops of the two opposing armies found themselves at right-angles to each other on the morning of the 18th of August. Still unsure as to whether Bazaine would attempt to march off to Verdun or maintain his positions at Metz, the Chief of the Prussian General Staff instructed his army corps to move forward in a staggered formation in a northeasterly direction.

By this, Moltke wanted to take account of both possibilities. Only when he had obtained further information about the enemy in the course of the day did he endeavour to set up a pincer movement with the army corps fighting on the extreme wings but this failed completely on the left and only led to a flank attack on the right wing.

Steinmetz, of whose three army corps only the VIIth and the VIIIth were on the west bank of the Moselle, did not understand the instructions given, which were couched in very general terms, ordering him to keep in close touch with the movements of the 2nd Army. When at noon on the 18th of August the first gunfire was heard from the direction of Amanvilliers, he ordered the VIIIth Army Corps to move forward at Gravelotte and also used the artillery of the VIIth Army Corps to provide support. Until the afternoon and apart from slight local successes, all the frontal attacks failed in the face of superior French fire. Due to the severe losses suffered and after almost all the officers had been killed or badly wounded, some of the Prussian troops panicked and fled as fast as they could.

With the 2nd Army, where the IXth and XIIth Army Corps and the Guards manned the first line and with the



IIIrd and Xth Army Corps, still licking their wounds from the 16th of August, occupying the second, the IXth Army Corps moved forward over a considerable distance and began the artillery action at about noon to the southwest of Amanvilliers. It was not long before the infantry, who likewise suffered severe losses, had to cover the batteries which had been brought up or protect their limbers. The Chassepot rifles and the machine-guns again reaped a bloody harvest and prevented every attempt to gain a respite by attack. The Guards advancing on the left also had to content themselves with an artillery action until the XIIth Army Corps, carrying out an encircling movement, was able to attack the enemy flank across Roncourt and St. Privat.

However, instead of waiting for this flank attack by the Saxons, the Guards launched an assault against St. Privat in the late afternoon when the French gunfire ceased for a time. The frontal attack by half-battalion and company columns was immediately answered by enemy fire and within a short time the artillery and the Chassepot guns with their

Attack by Saxon troops on an elevation occupied by French Turcos and Zouaves. Painting by Th. Götz (1878). Armeemuseum der DDR, Dresden

long range had accounted for 8,000 men. Once again, this included a large number of officers since they refused to obey an imperial order of the 18th August to dismount or even lay down with their soldiers. The gain in terrain finally won at St. Privat was consequently bought at a blood toll disproportionate to the result.

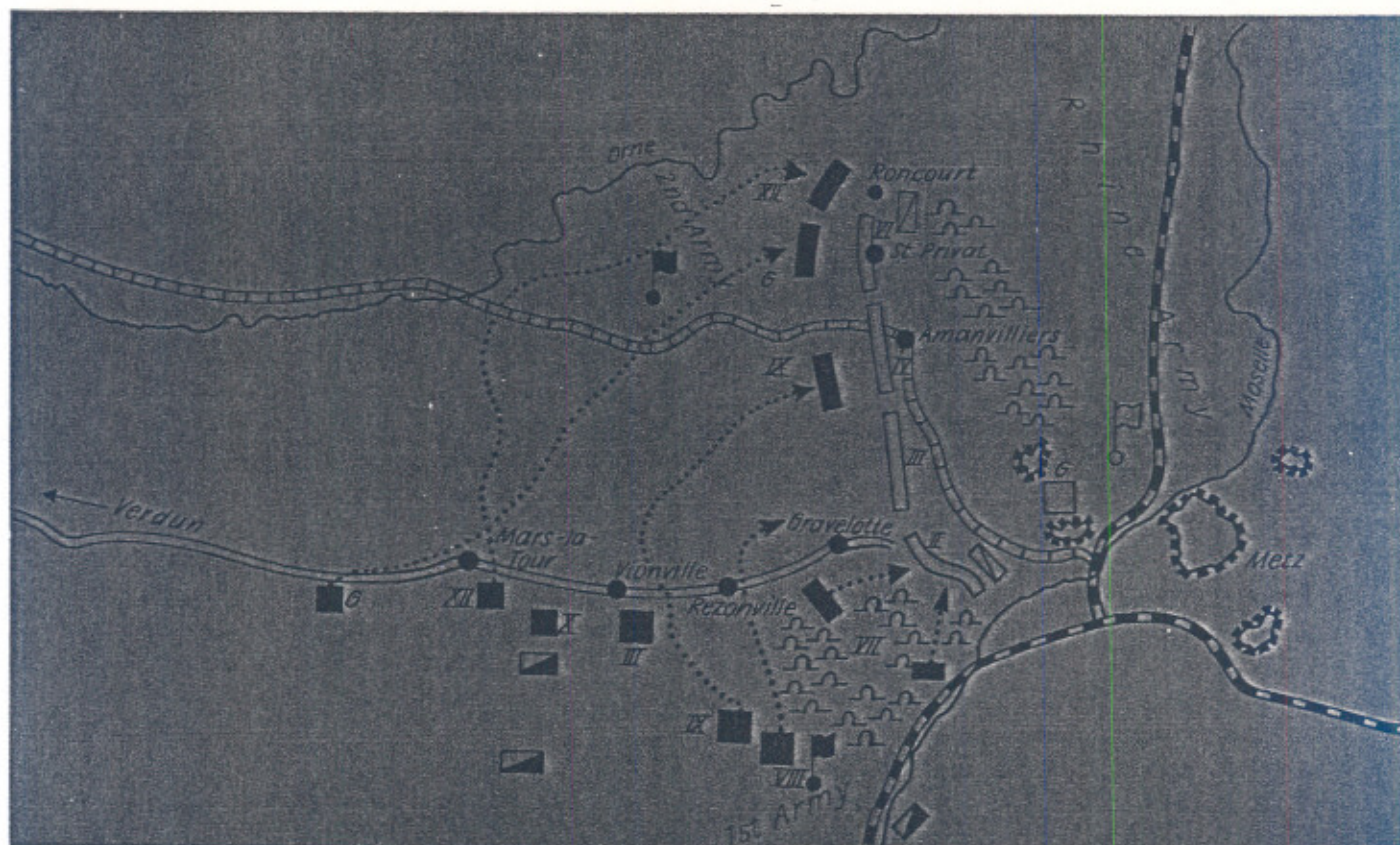
Only when the XIIth Army Corps moved forward via Roncourt in the direction of St. Privat at 7 o'clock in the evening were the Guards able to resume their attack against the village high above. In street and house-to-house fighting, they succeeded in defeating the French VIth Corps, which had exhausted its stocks of ammunition, and capturing St. Privat. Bazaine had refused to bring up his reserves in good time and to reinforce the troops fighting there.

Steinmetz, too, resumed the general attack at Gravelotte in the evening with the VIIIth and VIIth Army Corps.

- Prussian-North German army corps
- Prussian-North German cavalry
- French corps
- French cavalry
- fortifications
- railway-line
- railway-line under construction
- directions of approach and attack
- army supreme commands

When this failed once again, he was assigned the IInd Army Corps—the only reserves at the disposal of headquarters. This night-attack was likewise repulsed by the enemy fire and proved to be a senseless waste of human lives.

The approach of nightfall ended the recurrent actions in this great frontal battle. However, by the following morning, the French corps, which throughout the day had made brief counter-attacks but largely restricted itself to a destructive defensive fire, left its positions and withdrew to the real fortification area of Metz. As a consequence, Bazaine abandoned all his operational intentions although his corps had largely proved successful on the battlefield. The German armies had not been able to destroy the Army of the Rhine but the latter allowed itself to be confined to Metz, thus enabling Moltke, after a breathing space, to reorganize his forces and continue the offensive towards the





interior of France. It was the end of the Second Empire when Napoleon was taken prisoner at Sedan two weeks later.

Some sources state that 180,000 men fought on either side at the battle of Gravelotte—St. Privat. Others quote figures of 220,000 Germans, of whom 110,000 with 600 guns were involved in the actual fighting while the French forces numbered 140,000, of whom 84,000 with 400 guns took part in the battle. The French lost between 12,000 and 13,000 men in dead and wounded, while 5,000 were taken prisoner but the two German armies suffered 20,000 casualties. The main reason for this was the antiquated combat formation whose weaknesses were made even more apparent by the terrain which was unsuitable for a frontal attack. Faced with the devastating French fire, the company columns dispersed spontaneously after the first shock. To a much greater extent

Street and house-to-house fighting on the evening of the battle of St. Privat and Gravelotte. Lithograph by an unknown artist, c. 1880.

than at Königgrätz, the soldiers themselves took the initiative in forming groups and lines of riflemen, using the natural features of the terrain for cover and firing from a prone position. This represented a major change in tactics which was to survive by many years the founding of the "Second" German Reich at Versailles on 18 January 1871 and its annexation of Alsace and Lorraine.